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Book Review: *How to Be a Tudor: A Dawn-to-Dusk Guide to Tudor Life*

By Lark Winner

To modern sensibilities the past can seem like an alien world. This is especially true when the past is only viewed from the perspective of the top tier of a particular society. When reading biographies and histories of the Tudor period, it is easy to believe that the people lived in a world dominated by child marriages, outrageous pageants, and political intrigue. The lack of modern conveniences and technologies can also make one think that the time was dominated by poor hygiene and health. In *How to Be a Tudor: A Dawn-to-Dusk Guide to Tudor Life*, Ruth Goodman combats these ideas with a detailed look into the daily lives of the people of Tudor England. The author does not limit her scope to just the wealthiest, but includes all levels of society – from the poorest laborers to the peers of the realm. Although at times bogged down in detail that can be difficult to follow, in totality her book does a wonderful job of bringing the reader into the Tudor world and of making the daily lives of its people less alien and more relatable.

The book is organized into sections that are guided by a typical day in Tudor life. For example, it starts with a simple examination of the sorts of beds that different people in society would be waking up on as they begin their day. Goodman then takes the reader through different topics relating to daily life including hygiene, clothes, work, leisure, and food. Within each section the author delves into a plethora of details, backed up with evidence from period writings and illustrations, as well as modern archeological findings and her own personal experiments in recreating the Tudor lifestyle. These personal experiments, such as attempting to wear the undergarments typical of the period, lacing a kirtle, and making malt for ale, are the most compelling because they offer the reader a vivid window into daily life in Tudor England.

Due to the fact that Goodman's subjects are so varied and that she attempts to go into detail about each topic, it can be difficult to follow. The reader goes from a detailed explanation of the construction of a ruff, including seam allowances and stitch

patterns, to the intricacies of different socially-correct postures and gaits within only a few pages. The chapters would benefit from small illustrations of key items that are not necessarily familiar to the modern reader such as kirtles, rushes, or contemporary hair styles.

Goodman excels in her ability to dispel common myths about the living conditions in Tudor England. As so many histories of the period cover the lives of the major political and religious figures of the time, practices like child marriage appear to be commonplace. She refutes this widely-held misconception by revealing that the average ages of men and women at the time of marriage were actually “twenty-four for women and twenty-six for men,” which is not terribly dissimilar from modern society.¹ The author also successfully tackles the idea that hygiene during the period was incredibly poor. She employs many examples of how contemporaries highlighted the filth of others as way of showing what the society valued in terms of personal hygiene. If smelling poorly or having lice or fleas was something that society disdained, it would lead one to think that people mostly did whatever they could to remain clean and vermin free. She also backs this assertion up with her own experiment of wearing the contemporary linen undergarments and forgoing modern shower and bathing habits for six months. The author found that with minimal effort and period-correct laundering she remained relatively odor-free and clean. These experiments lend credence to her arguments and make the material easier to engage with.

Goodman’s focus on the vital importance of bread in her section on dinner is also illuminating. Modern society has largely demonized bread, but for much of history, bread was a central, and for some sole, source of sustenance. Her descriptions of the varieties of wheats that permeated the country are in complete contradiction to our modern understanding of farming. Simply put, there was no one ‘generic’ type of bread in Tudor England. Different varieties of wheat lead to tremendous variation in color, texture, and quality of bread. Regardless of the type, bread was a ubiquitous part of Tudor meals and, therefore, Tudor lives. As the author puts it, “bread for breakfast, bread for dinner and bread for

¹ Ruth Goodman, *How to Be a Tudor: A Dawn-to-Dusk Guide to Tudor Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2016), 120.

supper, day in and day out. Although it was often eaten with other foods, for the poorest it was bread alone.”²

One of the fascinating aspects of the Tudor time period was the convergence of old medieval practices with the new ideas and innovations of the Renaissance. Throughout the Sixteenth Century, England’s population doubled, and it saw great religious and economic changes.³ Through Goodman’s exploration of daily life, the reader can easily see how these two periods were part of a gradual evolution and not radically separate epochs. Instead, she shows how the flow of civilization adapted slowly to emerging industries, trades, and ideas. In one aspect, life remained the same: the need to have a local mill to process grain into flour, which was a trademark of medieval village life. At the same time, England’s textile industry was being influenced by the Low Countries, and the different Tudor governments sought to regulate the industry with various sumptuary laws throughout the period.⁴ Unbeknownst to those at the time, the growing textile industry would become one of the hallmarks of England’s Industrial Revolution.

Goodman includes numerous full color plates in the book, but they are not cohesively organized in a way that allows the reader to reference them at the corresponding moment in the text. This makes their inclusion somewhat confusing and unnecessary. As mentioned previously, it would have served better to include simple illustrations and diagrams throughout each chapter. It is quite difficult to imagine the description of how to properly buckle and secure a garter on a stocking by written description alone. This also raises another point of concern. Many of the descriptions entail too much detail especially considering that the reader is likely not deeply familiar with most, if not all, the subjects the author chooses to expand upon. At times, Goodman launches into tangents about topics that distract the reader from the point being made – such as her section on various oven styles and their differences.

These tangents, however, come from a perspective that is incredibly clear to the reader. Goodman is deeply and unapologetically excited about her topic. There is no other way to account for her zeal in trying so many different ideas, experiences, and methods in order to fully understand the reality of Tudor life.

² Goodman, *How to Be a Tudor*, 125.

³ Ibid., IX.

⁴ Ibid., 51.

This excitement helps carry the reader through parts that might not have any resonance with them personally. Overall, *How to Be a Tudor: A Dawn-to-Dusk Guide to Tudor Life* brings the Tudor period to life in ways that other, more traditional, histories cannot. While not always engaging, the book does its job in making the alien world of the past tangible, human, and accessible.

Author Bio

Lark Winner is a senior at CSUSB. She is majoring in history with a focus in European history, minoring in French and gender and sexuality studies, and working towards a certificate in museum studies. She will be graduating in the spring of 2018. Currently, Lark is an intern for the Anthropology museum on campus with the upcoming InDignity exhibition.



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